



HOW TO...

Use plug-ins

If you're itching to enjoy more effects from your image-editing program, plug-ins are a cheap alternative to buying a brand new package. Adam Banks explains how easy it is to increase your editing capabilities

Whichever image-editing program you use, even if it's the full version of Photoshop, there will come a time when you wish it could do more. All the basic adjustments are there to enable you to produce just about any result, but it's a lot more convenient to find a filter dedicated to the exact kind of effect you're looking for. Luckily, there are hundreds of such filters available as plug-ins that will work with most image-editing software.

More advanced plug-ins tie in with Photoshop capabilities such as layers and transparency, providing more seamless integration with the editing process. These are less likely to work correctly with third-party image editors, however. If you have Photoshop Elements version 3 or later, most plug-ins should work, but it's still worth checking, just to be sure.

Although plug-ins interact with the 'host' software to varying degrees, they are actually separate programs. Installing a plug-in doesn't alter or upgrade your image editor – it just prompts it to add a menu option that launches the add-on. This means there's no need to worry about plug-ins crashing your image editor. If there is a problem, you can just remove the plug-in – by dragging it out of the Plug-ins folder manually if necessary – and then restart the application.

Some plug-ins, such as the DreamSuite series from Auto FX (www.autofx.com), can also be used as standalone programs without running an image editor at all. One benefit of this is that you can free up as much memory as possible for the plug-ins, which can place quite heavy demands on your PC. Remember that, as with any application, you can

only run plug-ins that are compatible with your operating system. For example, you should make sure you get Windows rather than Mac versions.

Here we show you how to install plug-ins and some examples of the filters offered by plug-ins that you can download free of charge. Besides the Flaming Pear and Ulead freebies mentioned, it's also well worth downloading Amphisoft's free and shareware filters from <http://photoshop.msk.ru/as>. There are plenty more free plug-ins listed at <http://theplugsite.com/resources/freeps.htm>, and there are several commercial alternatives available at www.photoshopsupport.com/tools/plugins.html.

1 Commercial plug-ins usually come with installers that find suitable host applications on your PC and store the plug-in files in the right place. You'll be asked to confirm or select which application you want to use as the host.

2 Free and shareware plug-ins are often supplied as a Zip archive containing the program files. Having extracted these, you'll need to drag them manually into your host application's Plug-ins folder. This will always be immediately inside the application folder, usually within the Program Files folder on your main hard disk. There's no need to keep sets of plug-ins in their own subfolder; indeed, certain hosts will fail to recognise them if you do.

3 Next time you run the host application, your extra plug-ins will be listed, usually at the bottom of the Filter or Effects menu.

Sets of plug-ins from the same manufacturer will organise themselves into submenus. Below you can see the Flaming Pear submenu within Photoshop Elements 3's Filter menu. Select a plug-in to apply it to the currently active image.

4 Some plug-ins are simple, one-shot effects that have no parameters to adjust. Selecting the menu command applies the filter immediately. In the screenshot below we used Flaming Pear's ChromaSolarize, available as part of a set of freebies from www.flamingpear.com/goodies.html. If you don't like the effect applied, use the host's Undo command (Ctrl-Z).

5 Other plug-ins are complex and offer parameters controlled by their own dialog box. An example of what is possible with Ulead's Particle, from www.ulead.com/download/freedownload.htm, is shown below. Having adjusted the sliders, click OK to apply the effect.

6 An example of a more integrated plug-in, Alien Skin's Backlight, can be seen in the screenshot below. This uses a marquee selection, made in the host application, as a mask that dictates which areas are affected. In this case, the figure of the boy is selected and the effect follows its shape. An option allows the effect to be created in a new layer within the Photoshop document, giving the appearance shown while leaving the original image untouched. Backlight is part of the popular Eye Candy: Impact suite, a commercial package with a 30-day trial version available from www.alienskin.com. 